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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development and success of a pilot teacher training program in Thailand. The 1993-1994 long-distance, English teacher, secondary education pilot program was an inexpensive, effective model that could be used throughout the country and that would benefit teachers who are not able to take advantage of conventional inservice programs. Due to limitations of time, finances, and availability of trainers, language skills and teaching methodology of foreign language teachers in Thailand were difficult to maintain. This summary of the pilot program results identifies the determining factors of success, outlines some of the drawbacks encountered, and concludes with an assessment of the likelihood of sustainability of such a model. The program was developed by a cooperative funding effort between the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Secretariat (SEAMES). The York University English Language Institute (Canada) collaborated with the Singapore-based Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Centre on the design of the program, provision of material writers, and transfer of distance education knowledge and skills to the Thai team. The program initially targeted 45 teachers in 2 areas of the country; 36 successfully completed the course requirements. It is noted that those who completed the course showed significant improvement in teaching skills and knowledge and English language proficiency. (NAV)

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Language teacher education by distance mode: a pilot programme in Thailand

Rachanee Senisrisant

Abstract: *The language skills and teaching methodology of foreign language teachers in Thailand need continual upgrading. However, due to limitations of time, finances and availability of trainers, teachers from remote areas of the country have lacked access to professional development opportunities. In response to this problem, a distance training programme for secondary school teachers of English was piloted in 1993-1994. The aim of the pilot was to define an effective, inexpensive model which could be used throughout the country and which would especially benefit those teachers who have not been able to take advantage of conventional in-service programmes.*

This paper examines the pilot programme and adjudges it a success. It identifies the determining factors that have contributed to this success; indicates some of the drawbacks encountered; and concludes with an assessment of the likelihood of sustainability of such a model.

Introduction

The use of English as the language of international communication, together with the shift of language teaching paradigm from audio-lingual methodology to communicative approach, have had a great impact on teachers' ideology. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers now feel a pressing need to be competent in using the language, and hence they are continually making requests for in-service programmes to upgrade their language skills and teaching-methodology.

In Thailand, in-service courses for teachers are offered by higher education institutions at Certificate, Postgraduate Diploma and Masters levels. Shorter training courses are also available through Ministry of Education institutions, sometimes in collaboration with overseas agencies such as the British Council or the United States Information Service

(USIS). However, due to constraints of time, finance and availability of training personnel, such courses are not normally accessible to teachers in rural areas. Face-to-face programmes are usually conducted in Bangkok and other big cities, and can therefore be unaffordable in terms of both time and money for teachers from remote areas where schools cannot release teachers from their duties without imposing a burden on colleagues. (Hiring short-term substitute teachers or providing a pool system of substitution is not normal practice in schools.)

Teacher education by distance mode: a pilot programme

However, the Ministry of Education is currently exploring ways to improve the quality of English teaching throughout the country by providing equal access for all teachers to professional development opportunities. As part of this endeavour, a teacher education programme in distance mode was piloted in 1993-1994. This was a collaborative effort between Thailand, Singapore and Canada, aimed at developing the knowledge and skills of EFL teachers through mainly print-based distance learning materials. The pilot course was designed to investigate the assumption that this mode of delivery is the most economical and the most accessible for teachers from throughout the country.

The project was funded principally by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Secretariat (SEAMES). There was also some initial financial contribution from the Department of Teacher Education (DTE) of the Thai Ministry of Education during the planning phase, when project funds had not yet been made available.

The York University English Language Institute of Toronto, Canada collaborated with the Singapore-based Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Language Centre (SEAMEO RELC) on the design of the programme, provision of material writers and transfer of distance education knowledge and skills to the Thai working team. The Thai DTE worked with RELC in setting up a delivery system, conducting the pilot programme and evaluating the learners. The DTE also collaborated with the Department of General Education in the selection of personnel to work as tutors on the project. Finally, teacher training colleges worked with Regional Secondary Supervisory Units on selecting trainees and conducting the programme.

The objectives of the programme (stated on page 5 of the Tutor Training Manual) were:

> ...to provide participants with practical skills in TEFL [Teaching English as a Foreign Language] combined with theoretical knowledge in the area, and to provide them with an opportunity to further develop their English language skills.

The target group comprised 45 Thai secondary-level EFL teachers from two areas of the country - 20 teachers from Chiang Mai in the North, and 25 from Nakhon Ratchasima in the Northeast. The teachers from Chiang Mai were working at six different local schools and the teachers from Nakhon Ratchasima at 14 different schools.

Implementation of the pilot programme was begun in May 1993, with orientation workshops being conducted at both field centres by the project team from Thailand, Singapore and Canada. Prior to the workshops, much work had been done in terms of needs analysis, materials writing, pre-testing and field testing of the materials, and a tutor-training workshop had been run in Singapore. The project team from Singapore and Canada had visited the field centres and met with the trainees several times to ensure that the materials they were designing were appropriate to the teachers' needs. After the orientation workshops, the materials were dispatched in six modules over a period of 11 months between May 1993 and March 1994. Built into the module units were seventeen assignments that had to be completed during that time-frame. A tutor support system was provided.

A mid-course workshop was conducted at each centre in October/November 1993 to monitor the progress of individual trainees. A final evaluated task, in the form of an oral presentation, was assigned at an end-of-course workshop from 21-27 April 1994. Of the 45 trainees on the programme, 36 successfully completed the course requirements - a pass rate of 80%.

Achievements

Three principal achievements may be claimed for the pilot project. Firstly, at 80%, the participants' **success rate** was high. There were only three drop-outs at the Chiang Mai centre and six at Nakhon Ratchasima. Some

of these withdrew on account of a heavy teaching load or other commitments. Others did not acquire adequate language proficiency to be able to keep pace with the assignments.

- Secondly, there was a significant improvement in trainees' **teaching skills and knowledge**, as recorded in the Evaluation Report (Epstein 1994):

> The benefits of this program have been positive and far-reaching, contributing not only to the skills of participants, but also often to their colleagues'...Other spin-offs such as greater awareness on the part of participants of instructional design in their lesson planning, and distance education as an option for themselves and their students, are important. The benefits of improved EFL classes and more motivated EFL students will ultimately result in better English speakers in Thailand.

- Thirdly, it was noted that the participants' **English language proficiency** had improved. The course modules required trainees to read the materials provided and relate them to classroom practice. The assignments, which were marked by tutors, allowed the tutors not only to evaluate the participants' grasp of the concepts in the unit but also to assess their increasing level of English language proficiency. In addition, dialogue journals were used as a means of communication between tutors and trainees. It was made clear that the journal was simply a record of participants' thoughts and reactions, and grades were assigned solely on the basis of effort.

English language was used on the programme as a means to an end, namely an improvement in the standard of EFL teaching. However,
- due to the nature of the tasks set, trainees had to use the language constantly. As in most distance learning programmes, reading and writing were the skills principally practised. The pre- and post-course criterion-referenced written English language proficiency tests indicated that the majority of participants had developed in terms of language ability over the 12 months of the programme. At Chiang Mai 55% of the trainees passed the pre-test and 100% the post-test, while at Nakhon Ratchasima the figures were 24% and 63% respectively. It is interesting to note
- that tutors also felt that their own language skills had improved through the necessity of responding to assignments in English.

Factors contributing to the success of the pilot programme

These successes were achieved in spite of very limited resources and funding. They may be attributed to four main factors: materials, delivery systems, tutors, and trainees. Let us consider each of these factors in turn.

Materials for the distance learners had to be attractive and accessible. The appearance and the design of all the manuals was consistent, and the level of language not too far above the trainees' level of proficiency (*cf.* Krashen's $i+1$ in Krashen 1985). The materials provided a good balance between background theoretical issues and their application to classroom practice. The content focused on current issues relevant to the participants' teaching needs, covering topics such as: the integration of skills, the nature of communicative competence, teaching language in context, and theme-based teaching. Tutor-marked assignments allowed trainees to reflect on what they had read and tried out in the classroom.

Careful attention was also paid to the provision of appropriate **delivery systems**. Before the start of the programme, there was a three-day orientation workshop to familiarize trainees with the materials and methodology of the course. Materials were then sent out at regular intervals for participants to study. Assignments had to be completed within two weeks and mailed back to the tutors for marking. The marked assignments were later returned with comments and suggestions for trainees to improve their knowledge and skills. Allowance was made for telephone consultations to be used as one component of tutorials and monitoring. A three-day mid-course workshop was conducted to monitor progress and assist those who were having problems keeping up with their assignments; and at an end-of-course workshop an evaluation was made of trainees' professional development on completion of the programme.

In the pilot phase, both tutors and trainees were instructed to observe a set schedule. Those living far away from their field centre found that regular mail could not reach the centre within three days; the express mail service was used to solve this problem. Though telephone tutorials were highly recommended, trainees did not consult their tutors by telephone as much as had been expected, because of problems with the local communications infrastructure: telephones are not available in all

the areas where teachers were based. To compensate for this, the fast turn-around time for tutor-marked assignments played an important part in the communication process.

The **tutors** were selected on the basis of their professional background, their language proficiency, and above all their level of commitment to the project. It was fortunate that in the pilot programme all the personnel involved, especially the tutors, were very dedicated even though they had no release time to work on this project. Each tutor was responsible for overseeing the work of 10 trainees, in addition to their regular teaching load. As the budget was very limited, payments made to tutors were small - just US$ 60 per trainee for the duration of the one-year programme. Moreover, there were no funds available from the project for management personnel such as the Project Coordinator or the Country Coordinator. In short, if it had not been for the dedication and personal interest of the tutors and the entire project team, the project could not have succeeded.

For the majority of **trainees**, learning by distance mode proved to be effective. However, the selection process favoured some groups of candidates over others. Due to such limitations as a lack of experience with distance education, the selection time-frame, and the bureaucratic difficulty of working across departmental boundaries, the selection of trainees was not evenly distributed and not carefully controlled with regard to number, language proficiency, background knowledge and distance from the field centre. The one common feature that the trainees shared was that they were all EFL teachers with at least two years' experience. The number of participants per school varied from one to seven. The distance of schools from the field centre ranged from only eight kilometres to 200 kilometres. Teachers in these more remote locations had no easy access to a tutor and retained a full teaching load; some even had 24-hour responsiblity for a dormitory of young boys.

Despite the inadequacy of the selection procedure, the project was successful on account of the trainees' enthusiasm for learning new ideas and their resolution to see the course through to its end. Joint certification between the Thai and overseas institutions appears also to have had a positive effect on motivation.

Among the most important trainee factors influencing the success rate are: the level of participants' language proficiency; the location of schools with respect to the field centre; the availability of time to follow the course; the number of trainees per participating school; accessibility of tutors; availability of peer tutorials; teaching load; and the degree of administrative support. It is highly recommended that the selection of trainees for distance education programmes take these issues into account. Wherever possible, there should be at least two trainees from each participating school, and the participants should receive orientation on how to form positive working relationships with their colleagues.

Sustainability

The project outcomes were very positive. All parties involved were highly dedicated and worked beyond what might reasonably have been expected of them. Despite the limitations outlined above, the pilot programme may be seen as a success. With the experience that has now been gained in distance education by the working team, together with their dedication and the quality of the revised materials, the project will certainly be sustainable - given administrative support from the upper echelons in terms of release time for the team, careful selection of new tutors and trainees, adequate funding, and recognition of the certification as counting towards a higher qualification such as a Graduate Diploma or Masters degree.

A multi-national project of this kind requires very careful planning on the part of all concerned. To ensure the sustainability of this programme, two conditions need to be observed. In the first place, it is necessary to continue to assign to an administrator from the host country's Ministry of Education a major role in the recruitment and supervision of field staff. Secondly, the tutors from the pilot project should be re-appointed as tutors or as tutor-trainers on future courses.

Conclusion

The pilot TEFL distance education programme received a positive reaction from all parties involved. All of the objectives were achieved: the professional skills and language proficiency of the English teachers who

participated in the programme were improved; and an equal development opportunity was made available for teachers from remote areas of the country. The project brought together people from different institutions and countries and created bonds of friendship, love and trust between institutions and among the people of different nations. The benefits of the programme far outweigh the difficulties encountered during the pilot phase.

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